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DISCLOSURE TEXT:

- The configuration of communications software can be a difficult task for an inexperienced user, and APPC (advanced program-to-program communication) is considered by many to be one of the most confusing components to configure. The development of the Intelligent Context-Sensitive (ICS) Help mechanism is a direct result of our investigation into alternate ways of guiding the user through the process of configuring APPC. - The ICS Help mechanism provides the user of a Presentation Manager application additional assistance in accomplishing a lengthy and complicated task. In contrast to static help messages, ICS Helps are dynamic, presenting different messages depending on the state of the user's application. After the user completes a subtask and reaches a decision point, the mechanism analyzes what the user has already done, makes a decision about what the next logical subtask should be, and presents a message informing the user about its recommendation. - ICS Help consists of a collection of messages that recommend a course of action to the user, and a set of rules that enable the mechanism to decide which message is the appropriate one to display at any given time. Messages are displayed in a read-only multiple line edit (MLE) field on the panel from which the user performs subtasks. An example of a panel containing such an MLE is shown in the figure. The size of the MLE should be a fixed number of lines chosen large enough to contain the longest message. Although the MLE could be dynamically sized to fit the current message, the constant reshaping of the box at runtime might be considered distracting to the user. A facility should also be provided so that ICS Help may be deactivated if the user feels that no help is needed, or if the user wants to give the entire screen space to the application. In the figure, this facility is presented as a Directions pulldown in the action bar. - Associated with each message is a set of conditions that specify when the message should be displayed. A rule that could define the message shown in the figure might be: IF (the number of logical links defined is greater than one) AND (the number of partner LUs defined is zero) THEN display_message ('If you are finished creating logical links, start creating Partner LU aliases by selecting "Partner LUs" and choosing "New" from the action bar.') The MLE must be updated appropriately as the user creates, changes, or deletes objects. - Standard help messages are associated with specific window controls, and usually explain usage, syntax, or procedure. They typically do not help the user make decisions regarding what action is best among several legal choices, and they do not change as the user makes progress. -

The Intelligent Context-Sensitive Help mechanism is a way of providing a user with more assistance than these static help messages. It is "context-sensitive" because the process of selecting a message to display is a function of the state of the system. It is "intelligent" in the sense that it "understands" what the user is doing and has already done, and attempts to make a reasonable suggestion as to what the user should do next. - Additional applications of the mechanism in communications software configuration have also been discovered.

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[Previous Doc](#)

[Next Doc](#)

[Go to Doc#](#)